THE GREAT YEAR

Stephen Morrissey

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Acknowledgements

These poems celebrate the Great Year, a period of time that lasts 25,868 years during which Earth passes through the twelve zodiacal signs, and the Great Months, each lasting approximately 2,500 solar years. Poetry, like astrology and mythology, is the language of the unconscious mind, of dreams, symbolism, irrationality, and intuition. I wrote these poems in the late 1990s and revised them in November 2025.

—Stephen Morrissey

Cover image, interior of the cave at Lascaux, France

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In our present day, when this same planet, Earth, rocking slowly on its axis in its course around the sun, is about to pass out of astrological range of the zodiacal sign of the Fish (Pisces) into that of the Water Bearer (Aquarius), it does indeed seem that a fundamental transformation of the historical conditions of its inhabiting humanity is in prospect.

—Joseph Campbell
The Inner Reaches of Outer Space (1988)

Age of Virgo

(c. 13,000 - 10,800 B.C.)

The months begin like winter,
they are always longer than expected,
but we are patient
and wait for spring;
consider it
a time of rest and quiescence,
a time to turn inward:
add drawings to earth walls
white as fields—
and the days are dark,
grass disappearing beneath
more snow;
fields that are
austere,
the soul's condition
in winter.
The moon
cold and white
as earth,
it is also woman
round and open
unfolding secrets
of existence, repetition
of birth and death,
seasons, tides,
sunlight and moonlight,
planting crops,
bears hibernating
in caves, snakes
in a crevice,
deer's antlers
on the forests' floor:
this is the time
of silence, of
the soul's gestation—

at night
we see stars
moving in the sky.

Age of Leo

(c. 10,800 - 8640 B.C.)

A lion is born
in the heart,
he walks at night
enters dreams,
and when we wake
we hear growls, roars.
This is not
a time for prayer
or worship
of any god,
but knowing
an inner light
illuminating
consciousness,
as the sun
moves across fields,
mountains, lakes,
from morning rising
to evening sunset.
Here is the birth
of Apollo, somewhere
else Dionysus is born,
somewhere else again
Hermes and Osiris.
This golden age
when we found
light above our
heads, within
our souls;
and always
a lion waiting
in the distance.

Age of Cancer

(c. 8640 - 6480 B.C.)

We do not live
in caves, we visit
them as holy places—
each seed planted
is a new beginning,
and this is our desire:
the moon, the first
seed, erotic and glowing
in the night sky;
who could not be in awe
seeing the full moon—
stars disappear
and our homes
cast shadows
across the path
to the edge
of a forest or
the ocean's shore—
we visit caves
as sanctuaries
returning us
to what is lost:
a cave, the moon,
a woman's womb.
Floods cleanse
the land,
the soul
that watery element.
We place water
in bowls, seeds
in woven baskets,
the dead in graves,
live in settlements,
count seeds, trade
amulets, bracelets,

necklaces, female figurines
the size of your thumb—
the grave a container
for men, women, children;
bones with patterns scratched
on them, bodies positioned
in the earth containing them.

Age of Gemini

(6480 - 4550 B.C.)

When Adam and Eve
left the Garden
the journey began,
and so we find ourselves
always searching—
our memories
held together
by darkness,
tawdry rope
grown weak, unravelling,
and unkind.
Somewhere a garden
exists, but it,
too, is a memory;
our fall
is endured
alone.
We have invented
the Wheel of Life,
erected sacred pillars,
know gods in Heaven
and gods in the Underworld.
We are centaurs,
half man half
horse, half
divine and still
we are wounded;
why can we heal
others but not
ourselves?
I fell asleep
and woke at middle age,
so many years spent
in deepening sleep
until released

as though the ground
opened beneath my feet
and nothing was ever
the same.
Betrayal and grief,
love and compassion,
now I am someone
I never was
before, one
with the soul's
wounding.

Age of Taurus

(c. 4550 - 2400 B.C.)

The bull silent
in an ochre coloured
field, genitals hanging;
the shadow
in moonlight
of one
whose body was a man's,
whose head was a bull's—
he fed on human flesh,
his image inhabits
every mirror—
our passions
are too great.
We each
have one song
a chorus
repeating
our need for love;
oh, I am consumed
with betrayal
and darkness,
inhabiting
a labyrinth
and waiting
for my executioner
who even now
I hear trying to walk
silently, turning a corner
with a club and knife.

Age of Aries

(c. 2400 B.C. - 100 B.C.)

The moon
is red,
not with
harvest, but
like the earth,
with blood; once
peaceful men
became warriors;
battering rams
at the gates.
In the night sky
Mars is near
the horizon,
the same sky
on land
as on the sea,
where Odysseus
sailed;
someone asks,
"how could the goddess
not depart?"
Clouds
gathered
across the moon,
only a white circle
distant
almost disappeared
from the sky—
the sun, too,
is hidden
and everywhere
men leave home
to wander
and impose
their will.

Age of Pisces

(c. 100 B.C. - 2000 A.D.)

Fish surrounded me
when I was a child,
even my mother's arms felt
wet and cold; I could taste
salt on my lips
and lay with eyes closed
and knew the world
was an alien place.
I was surrounded by fish
all of them with
faces resembling
mother, father,
wife, mother-in-law,
they were sharks, piranha,
salmon, cod, pickerel;
they swam
upstream in my veins
finding a pool of warm
liquid in my heart
where they flung themselves
violently—
what heartache they caused!
At night I prayed
to God, as though this life
would never end,
my prayers were
the sound of water
flooding river banks
until giant boulders
are worn smooth. Soon
I, too, went to sea
and became a fisherman;
in my small cabin
cluttered with books,
a copy of the Vinland

Map spread across
my desk, and over my bed
was an icon of Christ
in whose arms
I rested; His eyes
followed me
as I moved from one
corner of my cabin
to the next, sometimes
His lips moved
shaping something
resembling a smile,
and I could hear Him
speak, in ancient Aramaic,
words I could not
understand;
I threw sardines
to a school
of dolphins
that swam beside
my ship, then
caressed their sides,
their eyes filled
with compassion.
The sea
is a cathedral
whose ceiling
is the stars
and whose floor
the blue water—
sun or moon reflected
it is a mosaic
of silver tiles,
the kind seen
in Roman palaces,
dolphins frozen
in the ceramic waves.

Age of Aquarius

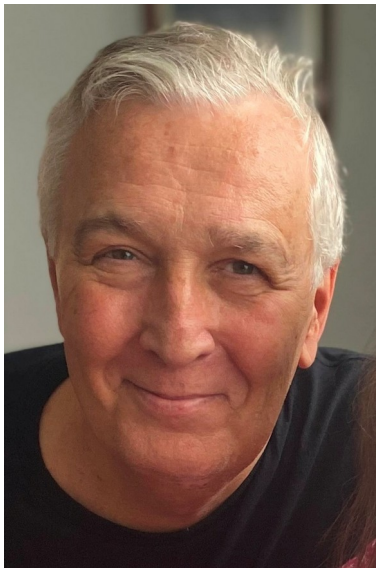
(c. 2000 - 4000 A.D.)

> the world felt itself
> at the beginning
> of a great change
>
> —W.B. Yeats

Odysseus took out
Cyclops' single eye
and for his deed
betrayed himself to thugs,
ten years in exile and travail.
Is this the dawning
of the Age of Aquarius?
We know the future
less well than ourselves,
ourselves hardly at all.
Like Odysseus we search for home:
waking on board ship to waves
slapping the bow and stern;
moonlight is silver
across foreign waters'
surface; written on the bow
the name "Aquarius".
We think of brave Odysseus
and know the sea,
know the stars and space
calling us with celestial music,
sounds we hear
late at night, when
darkness enfolds us in mystery.
In each port the gurus and gods
have gone, no more Christs
or Buddhas, only fanatics,
eyes on fire with millennial fever.
Still, wherever a harbour or farm
exists we find a home—

this awakens nostalgia
for the home we had,
exiles and outsiders
on the earth.
Our world is ancient
as giant turtles
or redwood trees,
where electric current
is the new river of life and blood,
making the earth one port,
one living being
in cosmic outer space

About the author



Montreal born poet Stephen Morrissey is the author of twelve books, including poetry and literary criticism. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree, Honours in English with Distinction, from Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in 1973. In 1976 he graduated with a Master of Arts degree in English Literature from McGill University. In the 1970s Morrissey was associated with the Véhicule Poets. The Stephen Morrissey Fonds, 1963 - 2014, are housed at Rare Books and Special Collections of the McLennan Library at McGill University. Stephen Morrissey married Vancouver poet Carolyn Zonailo in 1995. Visit the poet at www.stephenmorrissey.ca

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